

Washday

Rachel tasted the soup and lowered the gas. Now she had time for her morning coffee, and perhaps even the crossword puzzle, her daily mental gymnastics. She had not proceeded very far when the phone rang.

“Good morning, Ima. How are you this morning?”

“Not too bad. I’ve finished the cooking and have just started my crossword puzzle for today’s relaxation. Why are you calling so early? Is anything wrong?”

“No, nothing at all. I’m just on the way to a meeting and was thinking about you. I want to make sure you’ll be home tomorrow morning; we want to send you a birthday present...”

“A *birthday present*? It’s not my birthday, not for several months.”

“Don’t let that bother you; any day is good for a present and you need this one. Don’t forget, tomorrow between 10 and 12. Bye.” And the line went dead. Rachel shrugged her shoulders and returned to her puzzle. Probably some joke, she thought.

But next morning, at 11.45 the doorbell rang, and when she opened the door she saw two men in overalls, one of them bent double under the weight of a large crate.

“Where shall we put it, *geveret*?” asked the standing one.

“I don’t know. What is it?”

“It’s a clothes dryer, of course. Where shall we put it? This poor fellow’s back will break soon.”

Rachel hurriedly showed the way to the back balcony where her washing machine stood. The porter carefully lowered the box with a sigh of relief, and mopped his brow. He was grateful for the glass of water which Rachel offered him.

“We’ll open it and take away the packing,” said the overseer, “but only the technician is permitted to connect it. Here is his card, call him and make an appointment.”

Within two days, the dryer was installed and working. When the children phoned to say they were coming to see the great gift, Rachel managed to make up a load of laundry so that they could see the machine in action.

“Well, Ima, what do you say to this great invention? Isn’t the modern brain something?”

“It certainly is, but this invention belongs to the twentieth century, not the twenty-first. I’m sorry I didn’t have it when you were all in the army – it would have made life easier. On the other hand, you can’t possibly appreciate even the washing machine if you weren’t alive sixty or seventy years ago in the 1940s. Laundry day was something quite different then, and the washing machine was just beginning to become a reality. Not even automatic in the early years.”

“OK, mum, if you want to give us a history lesson, let’s sit down and have some tea and cake. What did you make for us today?”

“Apple pie, of course, with ice cream if you wish, and also some sandwiches if you are hungry. I’ll just heat the pie in the oven for a minute, till you sit down and I make the tea, then it will really be delicious.”

After the first onslaught was over and everyone was relaxed, Rachel began her story. “You know, when I was a little girl growing up in Australia, people lived in individual houses, bigger or smaller, with a back yard. Apartment houses were just beginning to make their appearance. In the yard there was usually a shed, or an extension of the building, which housed the laundry equipment, consisting of a copper, and a deep double sink for soaking and washing the dirty clothes. For this you used a corrugated, metal washboard on which you scrubbed the clothes, and then they went into the copper where they were boiled. This copper was about 60 cm. wide and deep, and heated by a fire underneath, which had to be lit early in the morning so

that the water would be hot in good time. The copper was filled by a tap, but had to be emptied by hand.

“Washday was a big production. First my mother had to make sure her help could come, because she couldn’t cope with everything herself. The laundry had to be sorted into whites and colored, but of course only the whites, which included bed linen, shirts, towels, hankies (no tissues in those days or colored sheets either), etc., were boiled, because the dyes were not yet fully reliable. Then one needed a good strong stick, like a shortened broom handle, to lift the hot clothes out of the copper, and back into cold water for rinsing. Then they were rinsed in “blue” water, wrung by hand and hung up on the line. Items which were starched, shirts and sheets, went into another additional process.”

“What do you mean by “blue” water? What was that for?”

“Well, one of the challenges for a housewife in those days was to have the whitest of white sheets and shirts hanging on the line, not dingy greyish ones like the neighbor. For this you needed a preparation called Reckitt’s Blue, a small cloth packet which you dipped into the water till you had a nice deep color. Don’t ask me how or why this whitened the laundry, but the company had a marvelous advertisement which I remember to this day. Huge posters on billboards showed a very white shirt hanging against a blue sky, and a text which said, “Out of the blue comes the whitest wash.” For years I pondered this statement, which made no sense to me, but years later when I was in London, I saw this same ad in the Underground, and got a lot of pleasure from it. Like meeting an old friend.”

“If there’s more to come can we finish the apple pie? I’m really hungry and could drink another cup of tea too,” interrupted Yossi.

Rachel laughed. "I'm sorry, you've got me really wound up and I keep remembering more and more details. There's another plate of sandwiches in the fridge, and I'll make a fresh pot of tea. But shall I go on...? It's not too boring?"

"No, no, it sounds like prehistory! But who helped out? You were too young even to hang up anything, especially something big like a sheet."

"When we were small, I suppose we were a great nuisance – we only wanted to bake potatoes in the fire under the copper. When I was tall enough I helped to hang the small items, and often it was my job to take them in, specially if it started to rain. But I must tell you about Mrs. Owen, the help, who came in for many years. She lived nearby and was like our Shabbas Goy, and sometimes lit the gas for us if it went out, but the laundry was her main job. The problem was that we were never quite sure if she would turn up. Saturday night was party night in Australia; that's when the heavy drinking went on, for some of the population. Sunday was not a working day, so the hangovers could be slept off, but it was *our* Laundry Day, since my mother worked during the week. Sometimes, Mrs. O. was too hung-over to come to work, and my brother had to fetch her, if she felt able to work. Fortunately, it did not happen every week. Eventually though, age and alcoholism won the day. She had to stop working and mother decided to patronize a new laundry which a friend of the family had started. Life became much easier, even if we had to prepare lists and check whether the laundry came back in proper condition.

"There was one funny little ritual we used to have, which I didn't understand. When we took in the sheets my mother and I would each take an end of a sheet and gather it in towards the centre. We would energetically rub the sheet together, then straighten it out and fold it up for ironing. If mother intended to iron right away, which she did on the large kitchen table, the items were damped down for better results.

If not, they were put aside till she found the time to do it.”

Rachel noticed the children looking at their watches. “Have I spoken too long? I do get carried away when I think of my childhood. When do you have to leave?”

“In ten minutes or so. We’re all invited to a wedding tonight and have to go home and change.”

“Can I tell one more story? I think it’s an amusing one, about me.”

“OK, but just this last one. Then we really have to go.”

“Well, when Daddy and I married, we had to buy all the appliances, which included a washing machine. It was semi-automatic, which meant that each stage of the laundry was a separate process. It had a mangle on the top, which only extracted the water and the clothes had to be hung up to dry. However, it was better than boiling the nappies on a primus, and having the washerwoman who sat on the floor wash everything by hand in a *pyla*, a large round shallow tin basin no longer in existence. That was the way things were done then in Israel.

“After a few years, the fully automatic machine came into being, but without the tumble drying. But my friend Yael and I decided we did not want to have this new machine. We had been influenced by writers like D. H. Lawrence and others, who were against the increasing mechanization of the times, and the weakening of the ties between Man and Nature. This was considered a Bad Thing!

And so Yael and I decided we did not want to be “bossed” by a machine; we wanted to make our own decisions about how and when the machine would work. However, we were won over eventually by the convenience and efficiency of the new invention, and grudgingly bought the automatic washer. But I never bought a dryer, because it was more “natural” for clothes to dry in the sun. Yael and I still have a laugh today about that “quandary” we created, but I hope

you notice that today's "green movement" is not such a new idea. And to this day I have a prejudice against these new smart machines, specially those that can talk!

"OK. Now off you go.... You can be sure I will enjoy using the dryer; it's a great gift at this stage of my life. I will consider it a housewarming present, for this new apartment. I only wish Abba was here to see how well you are looking after me.... Drive carefully, enjoy the wedding.... Bye."